

They fought to save the bay

SUN APR 22 1990

Nobody, but perhaps the trio themselves, would dispute it. They are the heroes. They saved San Francisco Bay.

Esther Gulick, Catherine Kerr and Sylvia McLaughlin insist they did not do it alone. And, they add, the bay is not saved, yet. But, they are proud of what they've done.

It is good thing the three women from Berkeley didn't wait until Earth Day 1970 to get involved. It would have been too late.

In 1961, Berkeley proposed to fill 2,000 acres of shoreline and nearly double the size of the city. It would provide room for an airport, hotels, houses, schools and commercial development.

At about the same time, the Army Corps of Engineers presented a report showing that the bay would be little more than a narrow deep-water shipping channel by 2020 if all the shallow bay waters that could be filled, were filled.

"All the cities along the bay were subject to pressures to fill. A state regulatory agency was the only answer," said McLaughlin recently.

People didn't know most of the bay, other than the deep shipping channels, was not publicly owned, said Gulick. When the women began to study the situation in-depth, they discovered not only didn't the public own the bay, the public couldn't get to it.

They found there was only four miles along the entire 276-mile shoreline with direct public access in the mid-'60s.

The Save the Bay Association began in Kerr's home, and she brought McLaughlin and Gulick together on a crusade that remains an important part of their lives.

McLaughlin this year is serving as president of the Save San Francisco Bay Association. It now has 24,000 members with representation from 49 states and several countries.

When they started, recalled Gulick, "We were as innocent as innocent could be." They were also all college educated, connected to the influential people and determined.

Developers and state legislators soon learned just how determined.

Within a few years, their demand for a state regulatory agency was met with the backing and considerable influence of local legislators Nicholas Petris and Eugene McAteer.

By 1969 the Bay Conservation and Development Commission was made the permanent bay watchdog.

Today, the smelly garbage dumps that once circled the shoreline are gone. Sewer plants that dump into the bay face stringent regulations and the four miles of public access has grown to more than 100 miles, with a ring of shoreline parks now in the works.

And instead of the great shrinking envisioned by the Corps of Engineers, the bay has grown. More than 1,000 acres of shoreline has been returned to its natural state since 1969.

"We believed in what we were trying to do. We worked very hard. Certainly we were dependent on our friends and allies. You couldn't do it on your own," said McLaughlin.

— By Marie Felde